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BREAKING

Here's Why COVID Measures Like Masking And New Ones Like Safety Goggles Could Return If A Bird Flu Pandemic Is Declared

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TOPLINE An ongoing bird flu outbreak among U.S. dairy cows has led to three confirmed human cases in dairy workers, and although there aren't any confirmed cases of human-to-human transmission, experts warn safety measures like masks, vaccines and safety goggles will be needed if a pandemic is declared due to the virus's deadly nature.

GETTY IMAGES

KEY FACTS

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention told Forbes it's monitoring human and animal exposure to H5N1 bird flu and watching the situation carefully, though "the current public health risk is low."

- Although rare, bird flu typically affects humans who've come in contact with infected birds, and there aren't any confirmed cases of human-to-human transmission.

- The virus may spread from animals to humans through airborne transmission and through contact with infected surfaces, Dr. Jessica Justman, an infectious disease specialist and epidemiologist at Columbia University, told Forbes, though the exact transmission process isn't fully understood.

- Former CDC director Robert Redfield—who helped oversee the agency during the COVID-19 pandemic—told NewsNation earlier this month a bird flu pandemic is inevitable, so "it's not a question of if, it's a question of when."

- Redfield brought up bird flu's high death rate as a cause for concern if a pandemic were to be declared: Of the 889 confirmed human cases between 2003 and May, 52% resulted in death, according to data from the World Health Organization.

- WHO defines pandemics as large-scale outbreaks that can claim millions of lives, disrupt societies and devastate economies; it won't declare a bird flu pandemic until the virus causes several outbreaks in at least one country and spreads to another with high death rates in at least one segment of the population.

- Earlier this year, the CDC began including H5N1 in its influenza A wastewater surveillance data in an effort to better monitor the spread of bird flu, but due to limitations, it's not distinguishable between other

influenza A viruses, and testing can't determine the source of the virus, so it could come from a human, animal or animal byproduct.

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WHAT SAFETY MEASURES MAY BE PUT IN PLACE IF A BIRD FLU PANDEMIC IS DECLARED?

Experts have cautioned that if a bird flu pandemic is declared, safety measures will need to be put in place to mitigate the spread. Dr. Donal Bisanzio, a senior epidemiologist with the nonprofit research institute RTI International, told Forbes methods like masking and social distancing should be the first implemented. "Those are all the kinds of interventions we need to put in place to buy time for the vaccine," Bisanzio said. Justman told Forbes new methods like protective eyewear may be effective safety measures, especially among farm workers who have daily contact with potentially infectious animals. This is because all three U.S. dairy farmers infected with bird flu had eye-related symptoms, including one with upper respiratory symptoms, like pink eye and irritation, indicating the virus may

spread when humans touch or rub their eyes with infected hands. She also pointed to a recent CDC bird flu study that found ferrets—that as mammals have similar respiratory tracts to humans—became infected after eye exposure. Dr. Maciej Boni, an epidemiologist and professor at Temple University, told Forbes he doesn't think safety measures for a bird flu pandemic will be similar to those put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic because experts don't know yet how the virus will behave if it mutates and begins transmitting between humans. "H5N1 is not 10 or 20 times more deadly [than normal human influenza], it's 1,000 times more deadly," Boni said.

ARE THERE HUMAN BIRD FLU VACCINES?

There are several FDA-approved bird flu vaccines, including ones made by CSL Seqirus and Biomedical Corporation of Quebec, a subsidiary of GlaxoSmithKline Biologicals. The U.S. has a stockpile of FDA-approved bird flu vaccines, but they're not enough to vaccinate the entire country. Seqirus said it expects to have 150 million vaccines ready within six months of an announcement of a human bird flu pandemic. "I think the right course of action is to simply premanufacture several 100 million doses of vaccines and just have them ready," Boni said regarding pandemic preparation. Seqirus also announced in May it was selected by a brand of the Department of Health and Human Services to create almost 5 million doses of its bird flu vaccines as a form of pre-pandemic preparedness. Bisanzio pointed out better communication between public health agencies and the public will be needed for a bird flu vaccine rollout because "there was a lot of misinformation [about the COVID-19 pandemic], and that caused issues with the vaccine rollout, and some people didn't even want to get a vaccine," he said.

KEY BACKGROUND

As of May 21, more than 97 million poultry (primarily chickens) in 48 states have been euthanized because of bird flu since 2022, and cases have been confirmed in 118 dairy cow herds across 12 states, according to data from the CDC (unlike chickens, cows appear to recover from the virus). The Department of Agriculture believes wild migratory birds are the original source of the cow outbreaks that recently has experts concerned the virus may mutate and spread more easily in humans. Jeremy Farrar, chief scientist for WHO, called the cattle infections in the U.S. a "huge concern," urging public health officials to continue closely monitoring the situation "because it may evolve into transmitting in different ways." Though there's no evidence a human has contracted bird flu from eating infected meat, the USDA urges people to eat meat prepared at safe temperatures. To be properly cooked, whole beef cuts must be cooked to an internal temperature of 145 degrees Fahrenheit, ground meat must be cooked to 160 degrees and poultry must be cooked to 165 degrees. Rare and medium rare steaks fall below this temperature. Properly cooked eggs with an internal temperature of 165 degrees Fahrenheit kill bacteria and viruses including bird flu, according to the CDC. Consuming unpasteurized dairy products is also advised against.

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